

Service learning in Indonesia: developing undergraduate students' leadership during COVID-19 pandemic

Service
learning in
Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose – This phenomenological case study reports how 16 participating students built their leadership skill through a community-based service-learning project as a part of their undergraduate program at an Islamic university in Indonesia. Education for sustainability framework promoted by Warwick (2016) was employed to portray students' leadership development and explore their lived experience while doing service-learning project in their neighborhood.

Design/methodology/approach – Phenomenological case study was employed to portray how the participants engaged in projects that empower the community during their service amidst the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. They were interviewed using online platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom Meeting. To triangulate the data, the photos elicited during their field study posted in social media were also presented as visual data. The interview data and photo elicitation were transcribed, interpreted using interpretative phenomenological analysis and thematically analyzed.

Findings – The findings of the study showcase that the student participants transformed their sense of agency as learners into leaders. The service-learning program has also become a springboard for them to engage in the community service and build strategy to fill the local community's need, especially amid the pandemic of COVID-19.

Research limitations/implications – There are two limitations in regards to this study. First, this study only examined data garnered from a small number of participants that could not be used to overgeneralize the results of the study. Second, the participants were interviewed upon the completion of their service-learning project. It did not investigate the sustainability of the projects that the participants had carried out after the service-learning program ended.

Originality/value – While ample previous studies investigated how service-learning program that involved undergraduate students were enacted during COVID-19 pandemic, the present study specifically looked into how participants exercise their leadership skill upon the implementation of service-learning from education for sustainability framework promoted by Warwick (2016).

Keywords Education for sustainability, Service learning, Student leadership, Undergraduate students

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In higher education, service-learning programs play an important role in learning as the programs give students opportunities to engage in the community. Integrating service learning into higher education curriculum can promote experiential learning which is meaningful to develop students' professional skills and civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995). Chambers and Lavery (2017) propose that service learning as pedagogy

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allows students to develop their responsibility to share and implement what they learn in the class to society. To add, [Hlale and Tsotetsi \(2016\)](#) pinpoint that engaging students in service learning enable them to reflect on what role they can take and how they can empower the community. Anchored in this action learning paradigm, students are encouraged to have prior knowledge of the field, which can be used to identify problems faced by society and offer solutions. Last but not least, they also need to raise their awareness of sociocultural norms accepted by the community so that they can develop normative competence, the ability “to evaluate situations based on norms and principles” ([Halberstadt et al., 2019](#), p. 1939).

Numerous studies on service learning have been conducted to respond to various opportunities of community development in various countries such as in Australia, German, South Africa and United States. First, [Bennett et al. \(2016\)](#) conducted action research investigating the enactment of service-learning, art-based service learning (ABSL), to promote indigenous content to art majors, pre-service teachers, indigenous artists and elders, children and young people in Australia. The study revealed two key findings in establishing service-learning sustainability: the institutional commitment and the fluidity of interactions. Next, [Halberstadt et al. \(2019\)](#) investigated how service learning can foster social entrepreneurship competencies of 40 master’s students studying at a German university. The study found that service learning could improve participants’ two main competences, communication and interaction skills. In a study conducted by [Hlale and Tsotetsi \(2016\)](#) in South Africa, six student teachers were selected to voluntarily teach natural science and mathematics at a junior secondary school. After the service-learning program ended, they were interviewed to examine their adaptive capabilities. The study concluded that service learning facilitated the development of their expertise and social skills. Finally, [Wood-Nartker et al. \(2011\)](#) invited interior designs students from the United States and architectural students from Beijing to collaborate in an international service-learning project focusing on designing combined nursing home, adult day program and child day care center. The study revealed that the students could develop not only ideas of modern building design integrating the West and East style but also inter-sociocultural communication competence. These previous studies indicate that service-learning programs offer advantages of building students’ interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and improving their expertise.

Although service learning provides advantages in students learning, some challenges that students might encounter during the program need to be anticipated. This issue was reported by [Bennett et al. \(2016\)](#) that there were three challenges in service learning, namely structure, process and funding. Moreover, in the initial teacher education context, [Jia et al. \(2018\)](#) also reported three challenges faced by pre-service teachers during their service learning: limited communication with their cooperating teacher, conflict about project requirement and need, and lacking project orientation. Meanwhile, a service-learning program conducted in a large and remote geographical area may double the challenges compared to online service learning. Consequently, students should be prepared with technology literacy to communicate the project with their supervising faculty members online ([Nielsen, 2016](#)). With this in mind, program planning, orientation and funding play critical roles in helping students attain their project goals. Additionally, developing students’ technology literacy is also necessary so that students are ready when service learning is conducted online.

Literature review

Service-learning during COVID-19 pandemic

Theoretically speaking, service learning is grounded in constructivism and experiential education theories ([Furco, 2001](#)). [Jacoby \(2014, p. 1\)](#) defines service learning as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes”. Furthermore, [Chambers and Lavery \(2017\)](#) emphasize that

responsible for preparing students to become leaders of the future. Meanwhile, [Cherkowski et al. \(2020\)](#) add that universities can engage students in research, teaching and service to develop students' leadership and give them opportunities to build their sense of agency.

By (2021) stipulates that "everyone leading are leaders" (p. 34). However, [Seemiller \(2013, 2016\)](#) distinguishes student leadership competencies into four different aspects: knowledge, value, ability and behavior. [Manzano et al. \(2017, p. 70\)](#) argue that "[L]eadership refers to processes guided by an incremental change paradigm for achieving goals, generally using institutionally sanctioned avenues." Meanwhile, literature discussing the university's role in helping build student leadership through service learning presents different views. For example, the university mediates the development of student leadership through a series of activities such as classroom projects and internships through which students can apply theory into practice ([Olsen and Burke, 2014](#)). To add, [Milton and Meade \(2018\)](#) open an opportunity for students to participate in the library student liaison program performing basic tasks of the academic library to develop their leadership skills. Also, [Fox and Kang \(2018\)](#) reported that faculty supported international social work conferences organized by undergraduate students to exercise their leadership skills. These exemplary models can foster student participation and engagement in leadership and activism ([Manzano et al., 2017](#)).

After facilitating students with a leadership development program, the university needs to evaluate its impact on their leadership skills. [Milton and Meade \(2018\)](#) assessed three parameters to reflect on the program: (1) how an individual made meaning of the gained experience; (2) how an individual was engaged in group work to attain the success of the program and (3) how the group could contribute to the community. In addition, [Warwick \(2016\)](#) offers two general dimensions of education for sustainability in framing the development of student leadership, namely holistic relational dimensions (the biosphere dimension which is related to people and planet, the spatial dimension which is related to place contexts and the temporal dimension which is related to time frame) and pedagogical dimensions (the critical dimension which is related to systems of thinking, the creative dimension which is related to creative capacities and active learning dimension which is related to the pursuit of sustainability). Using this framework, [Fox et al. \(2019\)](#) explored the integration of education for sustainability into the curriculum. They found out that the framework "offers helpful views of relational and pedagogical principles, a broader view of 'pedagogy', made it possible to reveal the importance of curriculum (p. 232)."

Drawing from this argument, the present study employed Warwick's perspectives to examine how service learning that fosters student engagement can build student leadership, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. To discuss this further, this phenomenological study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How can service learning engage students in service learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- (2) How can service learning develop student leadership skills portrayed from education for sustainability perspectives?

Research design

Epistemologically speaking, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is grounded in interpretivism lens which focuses on examining voices of participants dealing with their experiences and understanding in a particular context ([Boden et al., 2019](#)). The present phenomenological case study examines how undergraduate students can develop their student leadership skills during service-learning program conducted in the nearby neighborhood amid the COVID-19. In addition, [Smith and Osborn \(2008\)](#) pinpoint that IPA

is employed to scrutinize a research participant's lived experience and personal perception. With this in mind, this study attempts to investigate how undergraduate students engaged themselves in service learning situated in their neighborhood during the pandemic of COVID-19. Furthermore, it also looks into the development of student leadership skills from Warwick's framework on education for sustainability, including (1) the biosphere dimension; (2) the spatial dimension; (3) the temporal dimension; (4) the critical dimension; (5) the creative dimension and (6) active learning dimension.

Context and research participants

This study was conducted at a state Islamic university in East Java, Indonesia. The university implemented a service-learning program from home by referring to the decree of the Indonesian Directorate General of Islamic Education Number 3394 of 2020 concerning technical instructions for service learning enacted from home during the COVID-19 outbreak. In response, the university institution of research and community services made a policy to conduct a service-learning program for students from their home or their neighborhood, focusing on building health literacy of the community, preventing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, promoting religious moderation and providing Islamic education. Besides, students could increase scientific productivity such as writing books, papers or opinions on their respective study programs. They were also encouraged to create social media accounts, such as Instagram to post their program and activities.

As part of the university curriculum, service learning is given two academic credits. Students enrolling in the service-learning program must have passed at least 100 credits and are in the sixth semester. To monitor the program, one group of students (between 15 and 20) is supervised by one faculty member. In this study, one of the researchers was assigned to supervise 16 students. He was responsible for providing in-depth consultation and making sure that the participating students made a low-risk project from the transmission of COVID-19. [Table 1](#) shows the demography of the students participating in this study.

The service-learning program started with orientation and briefing activities for supervising faculty members. The activities provided them with an overview of the service-learning program undertaken at the student's neighborhood. The orientation was carried out online through the Zoom Meeting application in July 2020. After the supervisors

No	Name	Gender	Age	Study program	Semester	SL location
1	FMD	Female	21	Family law	6	Bondowoso
2	AA	Male	21	History of Islamic civilization	6	Jember
3	JAN	Male	22	Constitutional law	6	Situbondo
4	ANF	Female	21	Sharia economics	6	Jember
5	FU	Male	21	Islamic communication and broadcasting	6	Bondowoso
6	FI	Female	21	Sharia economics	6	Jember
7	FS	Female	21	Islamic communication and broadcasting	6	Jember
8	IZ	Female	21	Islamic communication and broadcasting	6	Jember
9	LY	Female	21	Islamic guidance and counseling	6	Sumenep
10	LHH	Female	22	Sharia banking	6	Situbondo
11	MA	Female	21	Sharia banking	6	Probolinggo
12	MR	Male	22	Family law	6	Situbondo
13	SA	Female	21	History of Islamic civilization	6	Pasuruan
14	AAM	Female	21	Sharia banking	6	Probolinggo
15	AK	Male	21	Sharia accounting	6	Jember
16	KH	Female	21	Sharia economics	6	Jember

Table 1.
The demography of the
participating students

received the program orientation, they briefed the students participating in the service-learning program under their supervision. Then, they could follow-up to do the service learning around their neighborhood. This service-learning model was different from the ones conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic of COVID-19, students were sent to a location far away from their homes selected by the university. The present service-learning program took place in August 2020, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Thus, the students were advised to propose simple programs (i.e. educating children and adults about the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting health literacy) that did not pose them to health risks. During the implementation of the programs, the supervising faculty member continued to monitor the students online, starting from daily activities, preparation of activities and implementation of activities to the program evaluation process. The supervision was done virtually using online platforms such as Zoom Meeting or video call using WhatsApp. All programs carried out by the students must be published on social media, such as Instagram, both on their personal and group-owned accounts. This publication was used to disseminate their projects, such as educating people with health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic through photos or posters. In addition, the supervisor also used this publication to monitor the progress of the activities implemented in the service-learning program. The service-learning program lasted for 30 days. After that, all participating students were required to write a report and reflect on each activity.

Data collection and analysis

Sixteen students participated in this study (see [Table 1](#)). Undertaking a study involving participants under the researcher's supervision may lead to social desirability bias. [Bergen and Labonté \(2019, p. 1\)](#) stipulate that social desirability bias occurs due to researcher-participants relationship which may cause "overestimation of the positive and diminished heterogeneity in responses, resulting in a questionable appearance of consensus." To anticipate this, before the research, the students were required to sign a consent letter detailing the objectives of the research. The letter made sure that their participation was voluntary, meaning that they could withdraw from this study at any time. They were also reassured that their decision whether they participated or not would not affect the credit of their service-learning program. Furthermore, the letter also explained that the use of the photos for the study has received approval of people whose pictures were taken, except children under the age of 12 years old whose faces appeared in the photos were blurred. After this procedure was fulfilled, the researchers interviewed the participating students online regarding their lived experience during their service learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. An interview protocol was made based on the education for sustainability framework proposed by [Warwick \(2016\)](#). [Table 2](#) shows the questions used to guide the interviews.

The first interview was done in September 2020 using WhatsApp. Each participant was interviewed between 15 and 20 min. Their responses were voice recorded. After the interview results were transcribed, the second interview was done in November 2020 to elaborate on their response. The second interview lasted between 10 and 15 min and voice recorded. The interview was done using the Zoom Meeting application. In this study, data triangulation was done to counterbalance and make sure consistency ([Shea, 2021](#)). Thus, to triangulate the data, photos posted on Instagram were utilized. [Glaw et al. \(2017\)](#) distinguished visual methodologies in qualitative research into two, auto-photography and photo-elicitation. While the first refers to photos taken by the participating students, the latter refers to photos used to elicit verbal discussion. In this study, photos posted on Instagram were chosen based on the focus of the study. In addition, they were used during the second interview to elaborate the first interview data. Anchored in IPA, [Smith and Osborn \(2008\)](#) emphasize that making meaning of the data can be done through "a sustained engagement with the text and a process

Data type	Example	Data identity	Interpretation
Interview	During the pandemic of COVID-19, schools were closed, and children did not go to school and studied from home. To [active learning] that they could not get during online learning, we prevented the spread of COVID-19 [biosphere dimension; creative learning]	(Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, FMD)	The participants designed activities that allow children to learn how to prevent COVID-19 authentically
Picture		(Photo taken from Instagram, 13 August 2020)	The participant taught a girl how to wash her hands to prevent herself from COVID-19 risk

Table 3.
The example of data analysis

Figure 1.
Participating students demonstrated how to wash hand in 20 s to a girl



to wash their hands [creative learning] correctly in 20 seconds. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, FMD)

One simple socialization [temporal dimension] that we did was teaching children how to wash hands properly with running water and soap. This is important to help build awareness of their

health [critical dimension] and to stay away from the virus. After the training, we expect that they can wash hand before and after doing things as habits. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, KH)

The second example of the students' project socialization given to people is on the importance of wearing a mask and distributing free masks to the community. They urged that people needed to be educated that wearing masks while interacting with other people could prevent the spread of COVID-19. While the availability of masks was scarce when the first wave of the pandemic occurred in Indonesia, they created hand-made face shield together (see [Figure 2](#)). Then, they distributed free face shields to the society together with the local foundation.

From the interview results, it was found that some people were not aware that wearing a mask during a pandemic was important to prevent the spread of the virus. The participants' view below shows that educating people to wear a mask while going out was necessary.

Distributing masks and educating people to wear a mask [biosphere dimension; active learning] is very important to build the society's awareness to prevent the transmission of the virus. Unfortunately, some people tend to think that the virus would not harm them. As a result, the number of COVID-19 patients increased in a nearby local hospital. From our campaign, we expect people to understand better [critical dimension] the importance of wearing masks when interacting with others. At least they are not easily transmitted by people suspected of COVID-19 (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, SA).

Face masks were very rare when the first prevalence of COVID-19 struck our area. While we do not have the skill of sewing cloth for making a mask, we find making a face shield instead of a cloth mask easier [creative learning]. So, we distributed face shields to children [biosphere dimension; active learning] when the school allowed half class sized entered the school (Zoom Meeting interview, November 21, 2020, ANF).

The data of the interview excerpts indicate that some people's literacy about coronavirus was low, so they tended not to wear a mask when going outside. The students chose to educate people about the importance of wearing a mask to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. The data also show that students creatively created face shields due to the scarcity of medical masks.

In addition to the health literacy development and education program, students were also engaged in activities responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as making hand sanitizer. They made hand sanitizer from materials easily obtained from a local pharmacy and distributed it to the local community. Moreover, they also made disinfectant fluid that they sprayed to houses to reduce the spread of coronavirus (see [Figure 3](#)). The interview data show that the participating students responded to the need for hand sanitizer that could be used at places where hand wash facilities were not available.

We learned how to make hand sanitizer [creative learning] because people in our neighbourhood [spatial dimension] could not get one in the local store or pharmacy due to its high demand when



Figure 2.
Student distributing
masks and producing
face shields

COVID-19 occurred in the first two months. We learn first how to make hand sanitizer from the World Health Organization (WHO) website and read articles from Indonesia's health authorities [critical learning]. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 21, 2020, FS)

Besides making the hand sanitizer, the students also initiated spraying the disinfectant liquid from materials available in the local pharmacy. With the help of the community members, they sprayed the non-healthcare setting environment once a week.

We also learn from articles such as the WHO website [critical learning] to make disinfectant liquid used to spray non-healthcare settings such as houses, prayer buildings, and schools. We sprayed the disinfectant once a week [active learning; temporal dimension]. This is expected that we can reduce the spread of coronavirus. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, AA)

From both the interview and online posting data, the participating students engaged in the projects actively responding to the foci of the service-learning, namely educating and building awareness of the community about the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they contributed to building health literacy and making healthcare materials, such as face shield, hand sanitizer and disinfectant liquid. The participating students expected these simple actions to be an endeavor to reduce coronavirus spread in their neighborhood.

Sense of student-leader agency

Students are well regarded as future agents of change because they are born to be leaders in the future. In the higher education context, service learning serves as a platform for them to implement what they have learned in the class and build leadership skills to serve the community in real-life settings. In the present study, the participating students gained first-hand experience initiating member coordination and collaborating in enacting the program. **Figure 4** shows how students organized coordination to respond to the community needs facing the pandemic of COVID-19.

In addition to the online data, the following interview excerpts show how each member of the service-learning team discussed, supported and respected the project idea.

Before the service-learning program was enacted, we discussed with the group members [biosphere dimension; active learning] what programs could be best implemented in our

Figure 3.
Students making hand sanitizer and spraying disinfectant to a house

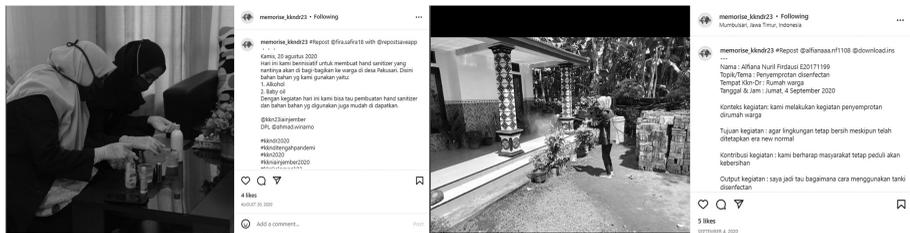


Figure 4.
Students discussed the project ideas



solution to the problems we faced when we did the program. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, MR)

We found out that my supervisor was very helpful. He always encouraged and motivated us during the service learning. When we consulted our project [biosphere dimension; active learning], he would hear the issue, our analysis, and our solution. After some feedback, he would let us do what might work for our project. We understood that he wanted us to build responsibility [critical learning] with our project. (Zoom Meeting interview, November 20, 2020, FMD)

The findings show that the participating students attempted to build strategies to carry out the project. They started the attempt by investigating the issue with local authorities, making an analysis, proposing a solution, consulting with the supervisor and finally implementing the program. Reflecting on how students built these strategies, it can be seen that they developed their leadership skills. In other words, the service-learning program has allowed them as future agents of change to critically think about what to do, why they should do it and how they did it when facing a real-life situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The present phenomenological case study explores how service learning could engage undergraduate students in projects responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it investigated how service-learning could facilitate the development of leadership skills portrayed from education for sustainability perspectives proposed by Warwick (2016). The study found that educating young children and adults about health literacy related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as washing hands, wearing masks, making face shields, distributing masks and face shield, making hand sanitizer, and spraying disinfectant is as a priority. From active learning, critical learning and creative learning dimensions, the students contributed to developing health literacies in response to COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with previous literature discussing the importance of providing society with adequate health literacy (Morgan-Daniel *et al.*, 2020; Paakkari and Okan, 2020). Meanwhile, students' engagement in this health literacy project can be categorized as holistic, relational dimensions (biosphere, spatial and temporal) from the education for sustainability framework. Warwick (2016) and Fox *et al.* (2019) stipulate that these dimensions relate to literacy, space and time in the context of the current phenomenon of COVID-19. In other words, engaging students in the service-learning project plays an important role in exercising students' leadership skill. To support this, Manzano *et al.* (2017) argue that providing students with opportunities to engage themselves in actions for social change can lead to leadership skill development.

The study also yields important finding that service learning becomes a catalyst for students to develop leadership skills. The ability of the students to coordinate the team members, discuss the project ideas and determine selected projects responding to COVID-19 issues indicate that they could work together as a team. From the dimension of biosphere, working with others improves student participants' interpersonal relation skills. Seemiller (2016) pinpoint that when students can perform effective collaboration, they may develop leadership skill as seen from the behavior dimension. To add, Tian and Noel Jr. (2020) argue that collaboration can lead members to solidarity when facing a challenging situation such as COVID-19. The study's findings also unpack the students' ability to develop their leadership skills by building strategies to carry out the project. This can be seen from their ability to investigate the issue, analyze the data, propose idea, consult the project and implement it. Grounded in Warwick's (2016) model on education for sustainability, students exercise their leadership skills through an experiential learning approach as seen from pedagogical

dimensions, including critical, creative and active learning dimension. In the same vein, Fox *et al.* (2019) highlight the need to situate appropriate pedagogies that can shape students' understanding of environmental issue.

Although the findings of this study add little to the body of recent literature, they may appear peripheral at the same time for two reasons. First, the conceptual framework used to analyze this study emphasizes on education for sustainability. This study, however, does not elaborate on the sustainability of the project after the students ended the service-learning program due to limited time of the study. Second, reflection as part of service-learning was not conducted (Chambers and Lavery, 2017; Kaye, 2014). Sitzmann *et al.* (2010) argue that reflection plays a pivotal role "to promote lifelong learning" (p. 184). Therefore, future studies investigating sustainability and reflection are suggested to fill the present research gaps. Future studies also should be conducted within a longer period of time and included more participants recruited so that more factors can be examined and more data can be garnered dealing with leadership skill development in service-learning programs.

Conclusion

The present study suggests that service learning amid the pandemic of COVID-19 could mediate the development of student leadership skills. From the perspective of the education for sustainability model proposed by Warwick (2016), student leadership can be fostered by engaging students in projects that address holistic, relational dimensions, namely biosphere, spatial and temporal dimensions. In the study, students contributed to community health literacy development to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19 by educating young children and adult on how to wash hand properly, wear masks, make face shield, distribute free masks and face shields, and make hand sanitizer and disinfectant. Meanwhile, implementing service learning, which promotes experiential learning, is also well-documented in the study. It was found out that students had the ability to examine the local community's needs, analyze the findings, discuss the project ideas, consult the project with the supervising faculty member and enact the project. These findings contextualize pedagogical dimensions (Warwick, 2016), which allowed students to develop their leadership skills through critical, creative and active learning.

Two practical implications of the study are addressed in the context of service learning. First, teacher educator who plays a role as a field supervisor in service learning may adopt education for sustainability framework (Warwick, 2016) to prepare students prior to the implementation of service-learning program. This can help learners build their leadership skill in the experiential learning contexts. Second, this study contributes to the importance of preparing students with disciplinary knowledge and situational knowledge so that they can critically examine what the community needs and how they can think of programs that suit the needs. Therefore, a field supervisor can help develop navigating skills during the briefing and orientation phase prior to the enactment of service learning.

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